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*Books in English by Ilan Stavans*

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The Hispanic Condition: Reflections on Culture  
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(co-edited with *Harold Augenbraum*)

TRANSLATIONS

Sentimental Songs by *Felipe Alfau*

# THE HISPANIC CONDITION



*Reflections on Culture  
and Identity in America*

ILAN STAVANS



HarperCollins Publishers



## *Life in the Hyphen*

What if *yo* were you and *tú fueras* I, Mister?

Born in 1885 in Jalisco, Mexico, the painter Martín Ramírez spent most of his life in a California madhouse, in a pavilion reserved for incurable patients. Since his death in 1960 he has become a symbol in Hispanic immigrant experience and is considered today a leading painter with a permanent place in Chicano visual art. As a young man, Ramírez worked first in the fields and then in a laundry, he later worked as a migrant railroad worker, relocating across the Rio Grande in search of a better life and to escape the dangers of the violent upheaval sweeping his native land. He lost the power to talk around 1915, at the age of thirty, and wandered for many years, until the Los Angeles police picked him up and sent him to Pershing Square, a shelter for the homeless. Diagnosed by doctors as a "deteriorated paranoid schizophrenic" and sent to the Dewitt Hospital, Ramírez never recovered his speech. But in 1945, some fifteen years before his death, he began to draw. Ramírez was fortunate to be discovered by a psychiatrist, Dr. Tarmo Pasto, of the University of California, Sacramento, who, as the legend claims, was visiting the hospital one day with a few pupils when Ramírez approached him, offering a bunch of rolled-up paintings. The doctor was so impressed with Ramírez's work that he made sure the artist had plenty of drawing materials to use. Soon Pasto began collecting Ramírez's work and showed it to a number of artists, including Jim Nutt, who arranged an exhibit of Ramírez's paintings with an art dealer in Sacramento. Other exhibits soon followed—in New York, Chicago, Sweden, Denmark, Houston, among other places—and

Ramírez, the perfect outsider, was a dazzling revelation at the exposition "Outsiders" in London's Hayward Gallery.

In a controversial text written in June 1986 to commemorate an exhibit, "Hispanic Art in the United States: Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors," at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., Octavio Paz, the 1990 winner of the Nobel Prize in literature, claimed that Ramírez's pencil-and-crayon drawings are evocations of what Ramírez lived and dreamed during and after the Mexican Revolution. Paz compared the artist to Richard Dadd, a nineteenth-century painter who lost his mind at the end of his life. As Carlos Fuentes, the Mexican novelist and diplomat, claimed in his book *The Buried Mirror*, the mute painter drew his muteness, making it graphic. And Roger Cardinal, the British author of *Figures of Reality*, argued that the artist's achievements should not be minimized as psychotic rambling and categorized him as "a nuff painter." To make sense of Ramírez's odyssey, Dr. Pasto concluded that Ramírez's psychological disturbances were the result of a difficult process of adaptation to a foreign culture. Ramírez had left Mexico at a turbulent, riotous time and arrived in a place where everything was unfamiliar and strange to him.

Ramírez's plight is representative of the entire Hispanic cultural experience in the United States. Neither a diluted Mexican lost in a no-man's-land nor a fully rounded citizen, Ramírez symbolizes the voyage of millions of silent itinerant *braceros* and legal middle-class immigrants bewildered by their sudden mobility, funously trying to make sense of an altogether different environment. But Hispanics are now leaving his frustrated silence behind. Society is beginning to embrace Latinos, from rejects to fashion setters, from outcasts to insider traders. New generations of Spanish speakers are feeling at home in Gringolandia. (Etymologically, *gringo*, according to Webster's Dictionary, is derived from *griego*, stranger, but it may have been derived from the Spanish pronunciation of a slang word meaning fast-spender, *green-go*). Suddenly the crossroad where white and brown meet, where "yo soy" meets "I am," a life in the Spanglish hyphen, is being transformed. Many of us Latinos already have a Yankee look: We either make a conscious effort to look gringo, or we're simply absorbed by the culture's fashion and manners. And what is more exciting is that Anglos are beginning to look just like us—enamored as they are of our bright colors and tropical rhythms, our suffering Frida Kahlo, our legendary Ernesto "Che" Guevara. Martín Ramírez's silence is giving way to a reevaluation of things Hispanic. No more silence, no more isolation. Spanish accents, our *manera peculiar de ser*, have emerged as

exotic, fashionable, and even enviable and influential in mainstream American culture.

However, just as Ramírez's art took decades to be understood and appreciated, it will take years to understand the multifaceted and far-reaching implications of this cultural transformation, the move of Hispanics from periphery to center stage. I believe that we are currently witnessing a double-faceted phenomenon: Hispanization of the United States, and Angloclization of Hispanics. Adventurers in Hyphenland, explorers of El Dorado, we Hispanics have deliberately and cautiously infiltrated the enemy, and now go by the rubric of Latinos in the territories north of the Rio Grande. Delaying full adaptation, our objective is to assimilate Anglos slowly to ourselves.

Indeed, a refreshingly modern concept has emerged before American eyes—to live in the hyphen, to inhabit the borderland, to exist inside the Dominican-American expression *entre Lucas y Juan Mejía*—and nowhere is the debate surrounding it more candid, more historically enlightening, than among Hispanics. The American Dream has not yet fully opened its arms to us; the melting pot is still too cold, too uninviting, for a total meltdown. Although the collective character of those immigrating from the Caribbean archipelago and south of the border remains foreign to a large segment of the heterogeneous nation, as "native strangers" within the Anglo-Saxon soil, our impact will prevail sooner, rather than later. Although stereotypes remain commonplace and vices get easily confused with habits, a number of factors, from population growth to a retarded acquisition of a second language and a passionate retentiveness of our original culture, actually suggest that Hispanics in the United States shall not, will not, cannot, and ought not follow paths opened up by previous immigrants.

According to various Chicano legends recounted by the scholar Gutierre Tibón, Aztlan Aztatlan, the archetypal region where Aztecs, speakers of Nahuatl, originated before their itinerant journey in the fourteenth century in search of a land to settle, was somewhere in the area of New Mexico, California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, Colorado, Wyoming, Texas, and the Mexican states of Durango and Nayarit, quite far from Tenochtitlán, known today as Mexico City. Once a nomadic tribe, the Aztecs settled and became powerful, subjugating the Huastec to the north and the Mixtec and Zapotec to the south, achieving a composite civilization. Latinos with these mixed ancestries, at least six in every ten in the United States, believe they have an aboriginal claim to the land north of the border. As native Americans, we were in these areas before the Pilgrims of the *Mayflower* and understandably keep a

Until the early eighties, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Central and South Americans, and even Spaniards were considered independent units in the United States, never part of a unified whole. If culture is defined as the fabric of life of a community, the way its members react in a social context, then Hispanic culture in the United States is many cultures, as many as national groups from Latin America and the Caribbean, linguistically tied together—with Antonio de Nebrija, the first grammarian of the Spanish language, as a paternal figure. After the 1990 U.S. Census, which counted more than 22 million Hispanics—9 percent of the overall population (although at least 3 million wandering illegal immigrants should probably be added to that count)—we emerged as a solid political and social force. At that time the median income per Hispanic family was \$23,446, whereas a white, non-Hispanic family earned an average of \$35,975. The census also showed large concentrations of Hispanics in California and Texas, where 12 million or over half (53.8 percent) of all U.S. Hispanics live, followed by New York and Florida, where nearly 4 million, or about 17 percent, live. To put things into perspective, in 1980 Hispanics totaled 6.4 percent of the population, in 1990 9 percent of the population, and it is estimated that by the year 2000 Hispanics will exceed 31.2 million or 11.6 percent of the total U.S. population. Before the eighties our political struggles and social behavior were often associated, in the view of Congress and in governmental offices, with an image of some monstrous creature, inchoate, formless, inconstant, whose metabolism was difficult to define. Assimilation was analyzed according to our independent nationalities: For instance, many Cubans who came to the country after the 1959 Communist Revolution and before the Mariel boat lift in 1980 were educated upper- and middle-class people; consequently, their adaptation acquired a different rhythm from that of Puerto Ricans, who, mostly as *jíbaros* from rural areas near San Juan and elsewhere on their native West Indian island, arrived in the United States illiterate and without a penny. Although not all Cubans were well-off nor all Puerto Ricans miserable, many thought the two subgroups needed to be approached separately and as autonomous units. Things indeed have been reversed. Today the various parts making the Hispanic whole are approached by scholars more or less uniformly, as interdependent screws adding up to a sophisticated, self-contained machinery: Latinos are seen as an assembly of forces, in close contact with their Hispanic siblings under the border.

The discussion on how Hispanics have been assimilated has been greatly influenced by, among others, Juan Gómez-Quinones, the dean of Chicano

telluric attachment to the land. Our return by sequential waves of immigration as webbacks and middle-income entrepreneurs to the lost Canaan, the Promised Land of Milk and Honey, ought be seen as the closing of a historical cycle. Ironically, the revenge of Motecuhzoma II (in modern Spanish: Moctezuma; in its English misspelling: Montezuma) is understood differently in Spanish and English. For Anglos, it refers to the diarrhea a tourist gets after drinking unpurified water or eating chile and arroz con pollo in Latin America and the West Indies; for Hispanics, it describes the unhurried process of the penetration of and exertion of influence on the United States—*la reconquista*, the oppressor's final defeat. Yesterday's victim and tomorrow's conquistadors, we Hispanics, tired of a history full of traumas and undemocratic interruptions, have decided to regain what was taken away from us.

There is no doubt that the attempt to portray Latinos as a homogenous minority and/or ethnic group is rather recent. Within the various minorities, forces have always pulled unionists apart. As Bernardo Vega, a Puerto Rican social activist in New York City, wrote in his *Memoirs* in the 1940s:

When I came to [New York] in 1916 there was little interest in Hispanic culture. For the average citizen, Spain was a country of bullfighters and flamenco dancers. As for Latin America, no one could care less. And Cuba and Puerto Rico were just two islands inhabited by savages whom the Americans had beneficially saved from the clutches of the Iberian lion. Once in a while a Spanish theater company would make an appearance in New York. Their audiences never amounted to more than the small cluster of Spaniards and Latin Americans, along with some university professors who had been crazy enough to learn Spanish. That was it!

The constant growth of the Puerto Rican community gave rise to riots, controversy, hatred. But there is one fact that stands out: at a time when there were no more than half a million of us, our impact on cultural life in the United States was far stronger than that of the 4 million Mexican-Americans. And the reason is clear: though they shared with us the same cultural origins, people of Mexican extraction, involved as they were in agricultural labor, found themselves scattered throughout the American Southwest. The Puerto Ricans, on the other hand, settled in the large urban centers, especially New York, where in spite of everything the circumstances were more conducive to cultural interaction and enrichment, whether we wanted it that way or not.

history; he wrote the groundbreaking 1977 essay on ethnicity and resistance entitled "On Culture," as well as studies of Chicano politics and the radical politics of the Mexican anarchist and anticlericalist Ricardo Flores-Magón. This discussion has been centered for decades on what theoreticians called "negative assimilation." Immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries—anthropologists, sociologists, and historians believed—were ready to retain their ancestral heritage against all odds and costs; their daily existence in an alien, aggressive milieu provoked a painful chain of belligerent acts against Anglo-Saxon domination. According to this view, Mexicans in East Los Angeles, Puerto Ricans in Upper Manhattan's El Barrio, or Cubans in Key West and Miami's Little Havana silently yet forcefully engaged in a battle against the environment's imposing values. The Anglo, always the enemy, was seen as colonizing and enslaving, a view shared by many south of the Rio Grande since the time of the Spanish-American War. In a tantalizing poem, Lorna Dee Cervantes, a Chicana in California, author of *Emplumada*, wrote about the pilgrimage to a paradise without complete freedom: "I see in the mirror / my reflection: bronzed skin, black hair. / I feel I am a captive aboard the refugee ship. / The ship that will never dock."

At the end of the 1960s, a confrontational, bold, politically charged era emerged. The Chicano movement, led by César Chávez and the intellectually sophisticated Rodolfo "Corky" González,\* which was intimately linked to the Vietnam War and the civil rights era, was, according to many, the apex of such social strife. The term *chicano* embodied the effort to overturn the dire conditions existing within the Chicano communities during the postwar period. And in their activism, Chicanos were joined by Puerto Rican revolutionary nationalists to form such organizations as the Young Lords, who fought for the independence and self-determination of Puerto Rico, equality for women, an end to racism, and better education in Afro-Indian and Spanish cultures. To oppose, to affirm one's own collective tradition, to remain loyal to the immigrant's culture, was considered essential and coherent with the Hispanic nature north of the Rio Grande. Such an attitude would often incorporate apocalyptic overtones. On the aesthetics of resistance, Gómez-Quinones once wrote: "The forms and ethos of one art must be broken—the art of domination; another art must be rescued and fash-

\* Unfortunately, when Anglicized, Spanish appellations and words often drop their accents. The explanation may be technological: Typewriters and word processors that are used in the United States either exclude them or have complex, laborious commands to bring them forth.

ioned—the art of resistance. . . . It is art that is not afraid to love or play due to its sense of history and future. It negates the exploitation of the many by the few, art as the expression of the degeneration of values for the few, the corruption of human life, the destruction of the world. At that point art is at the threshold of entering the dimension of politics."

Led by feminists such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, whose work is devoted to analyzing "the mestizo world view" (the term *mestizo*, from the Latin *miscere*, to mix, refers to people of combined European and American Indian ancestry), interpreters today are engaged in an altogether different frame of discussion. They suggest that Latinos, living in a universe of cultural contradictions and fragmentary realities, have ceased to be beligerent in the way they typically were during the antieestablishment decade. It is not that combat has disappeared or ceased to be compelling; it has simply acquired a different slant. The fight is no longer from the outside in, but from the inside out. We Latinos in the United States have decided to consciously embrace an ambiguous, labyrinthine identity as a cultural signature, and what is ironic is that, in the need to reinvent our self-image, we seem to be thoroughly enjoying our cultural transactions with the Anglo environment, ethnically heterogeneous as they are. Resistance to the English-speaking environment has been replaced by the notions of transcuration and transcuration, to exist in constant confusion, to be a hybrid, in constant change, eternally divided, much like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: a bit like the Anglos and a bit not. Such a characterization, it is not surprising, fits the way in which Hispanics are portrayed by intellectuals in Latin America. Octavio Paz and Julio Cortázar once offered the *axolotl*—a type of Mexican salamander, a lizardlike amphibian with porous skin and four legs that are often weak or rudimentary—as the ad hoc symbol of the Hispanic psyche, always in profound mutation, not the mythical creature capable of withstanding fire, but an eternal mutant. And this metaphor, needless to say, fits perfectly what can be called "the New Latino": a collective image whose reflection is built as the sum of its parts in unrestrained and dynamic metamorphosis, a spirit of acculturation and perpetual translation, linguistic and spiritual, a dense popular identity shaped like one of those perfect spheres imagined by Blaise Pascal: with its diameter everywhere and its center nowhere. We are all to become Latinos *agringados* and/or *gringos hispanizados*; we will never be the owners of a pure, crystalline collective individuality because we are the product of a five-hundred-year-old fiesta of miscelgenation that began with our first encounter with the gringo in 1492. What is

applauded in today's multicultural age is a life happily lost and found in Spanglish, which the southern writer and scholar Rolando Hinojosa, the Chicano author of the *Klail City saga*, calls *el caló pachuco*: a round trip from one linguistic territory and cultural dimension to another, a perpetual bargaining. Bilingual education, which began in the 1960s in Florida in response to a request from Cubans who wished to allow their children to use Spanish in public schools, has reinforced the importance of our first language among Latinos. The tongue of Spain's Gold Age poets Luis de Góngora and Francisco de Quevedo, rather than fading away, is alive and changing, a crucial player in our bifocal identity. The hyphen as an acceptable in-between is now in fashion; monolingualism, people in the barrios of the Southwest enjoy saying, is curable. One of the best portrayals of Latino assimilation into the melting pot that I know of is found in Tom Shlammé's 1991 television film *Mambo Mouth*, in which the performance artist John Leguizamo (who wrote the original play as well) impersonates a Japanese executive trying to teach Latinos the art of "ethnic crossover." He claims that in corporate America there's no room for "Spiks," and thus elaborates a method by which Latinos can look and become Oriental. In the tradition of satirical comedy, Leguizamo ridicules Hispanic features: dietary and dressing manners, ways of speaking and walking, etc. As the monologue develops, we learn that the Japanese executive himself was once a Latino and that, occasionally, he longs for the *sabor hispano* of his past. Slowly, as in Chekhov's dramatic digressions—indeed, Leguizamo's piece is remarkably similar to Chekhov's tragicomic monologue "On Smoking and Its Dangers"—the character loses his integrity; while speaking, his feet suddenly run wild, dancing a fast-paced salsa rhythm. Obviously, the method for "ethnic crossover" has failed: Wherever we go, as Latinos we will always carry our idiosyncratic self with us.

Even before the publication of Oscar Hijuelos's dazzling novel *The Mambo Kings Plays Songs of Love* in 1989 and its subsequent receipt of the Pulitzer Prize, an explosion of Latino arts was overwhelming the country. Young and old, dead and alive—from William Carlos Williams to Joan Baez and Tito Rodríguez, from Gloria Estefán, Pin Thomas, Diego Rivera, Anthony Quinn, and Oscar Lewis to María Conchita Alonso, Celia Cruz, and Cortijo—novelists, poets, filmmakers, painters, and salsa, merengue, plena, rumba, mambo, and cumbia musicians are being reevaluated, and a different approach to the Latino metabolism has been happily promoted. The concept of negative assimilation has been replaced by the idea of a cultural war in which Latinos

are soldiers in the battle to change America from within, to reinvent its inner core. Take the fever surrounding Latin America's magical realism, what the Cuban musicologist and novelist Alejo Carpentier first called *lo real maravilloso* after a trip to Haiti in 1943, and what has been used to describe, obusely, Gabriel García Márquez's fictional coastal town Macondo, with its rain of butterflies and epidemic of insomnia. Incredibly marketable, magical realism exploited the tropics—largely forgotten in the international artistic scene, aside from the surrealist curiosity about primitivism, until after World War II—as an extrinsic geography, full of picturesque landscapes, a banana republic of magisterial proportions where treacherous army officials tortured heroic rebels. Foreigners' obsession with such images quickly transformed the region into a huge picture postcard, a kitsch stage where everybody was either a dreamer, a harlot, or a corrupt official. After intense abuse and massive commercialization, where Evita Perón was Patti LuPone singing an Andrew Lloyd Webber melody, the image has finally lost its magnetism, eclipsed by a focus on another scene: barrio nightclubs and alien urban turf. You don't need to travel to Buenos Aires or Bogotá anymore to feel the Latino beat. Miami, once a retreat for retirees, is now a laboratory where Latinization, as Joan Didion and David Rieff have both argued, is already a fact, and where, as the xenophobic media claims, "foreigners," especially Cubans and Brazilians, have taken over. It is the frontier city par excellence: It has incorporated 300,000 refugees from Latin America who seem to have come with a vengeance; bilingualism is the rule; there's little pressure to become a citizen of the United States; tourists are besieged and threatened and unhappy Anglos have fled; and huge investments pour in from wealthy entrepreneurs in Venezuela and Argentina, among other places.

Although some stubbornly persist in thinking that the so-called Third World begins and ends in Ciudad Juárez and Matamoros, the neighboring cities south of the Rio Grande, the fact is that Los Angeles, first visited by Spaniards in 1769 and founded as a town a few years later, is Mexico's second capital, a city with more Mexicans than Guadalajara and Monterrey combined. And New York City, originally a Dutch settlement called New Amsterdam, has turned into a huge frying pan, where, since the 1970s, the Puerto Rican identity has been actively revamped into Nuyoricanness, a unique blend of Puerto Ricanness and New Yorkese, and where numerous other Latino groups have proliferated since the 1980s. Welcome home, gringo! Claude Lévi-Strauss's *tristes tropiques* have just been relocated: Hispanics are now in the background, while Latinos, with their Jerome Robbins-choreo-

graphed, Stephen Sondheim-lyricized West Side stories, have come forth as protagonists in vogue.

Tonight, tonight,  
 The world is full of light,  
 With suns and moons all over the place.  
 Tonight, tonight,  
 The world is wild and bright,  
 Going mad, shooting sparks into space.  
 Today the world was just an address,  
 A place for me to live in,  
 No better than all right,  
 But here you are,  
 And what was just a world is a star  
 Tonight!

In quality and quantity, a different collective spirit is emerging, seasoned with south-of-the border flavors. The new Latino's ideological agenda is personified in the breath-taking prose of Sandra Cisneros and made commercial in the Madonna-like mercantile curiosity, in the Anglo arena, toward veteran musicians Tito Puente and Dámaso Pérez Prado. Again, the objective is to use the mass media, the enemy's tools, to infiltrate the system and to promote a reevaluation of things Hispanic. For Hispanics Anglo-Saxon culture is, no doubt, still very much the villain, but the attitude is more condescending, even apologetic. As the poet Tato Laviera wrote in *AmeRícan*, a poem from which I quote two segments:

We gave birth to a new generation,  
 AmeRícan, broader than lost gold  
 never touched, hidden inside the  
 puerto rican mountains.  
 we gave birth to a new generation,  
 AmeRícan, it includes everything  
 imaginable you-name-it-we-got-it  
 society.  
 we gave birth to a new generation,  
 AmeRícan salutes all folklores,

european, indian, black, spanish,  
 and anything else compatible:

AmeRícan, defining the new America, humane  
 america, admired america, loved  
 america, harmonious america, the  
 world in peace, our energies  
 collectively invested to find other  
 civilizations, to touch God, further  
 and further, to dwell in the spirit of  
 divinity!

AmeRícan, yes, for i love this, my  
 second land, and i dream to take  
 the accent from the alteration, and  
 be proud to call myself american,  
 in the u.s. sense of the word,  
 AmeRícan, America!

Our understanding of the evasive concept of borderland—a never-never land near the rim and ragged edge we call frontier, an uncertain, indeterminate, adjacent area that everybody can recognize and that, more than ever before, many call our home—has been adapted, reformulated, and reconsidered. Hyphenated identities become natural in a multiethnic society. After all, democracy, what Felipe Alfau called the tyranny of the many, asks for a constant reevaluation of the nation's history and conviviality. And yet, a border is no longer only a globally accepted, internationally defined edge, the legal boundary dividing two or more nations; it is first and foremost a mental state, an abyss, a cultural hallucination, a fabrication. Latinos, as frontier dwellers, immersed in the multicultural banquet, can no longer afford to live quietly on the margins, parasites of a bygone past. For today's newly arrived immigrant, *la patria*, one's home nation, what Yiddish-speaking immigrants once called *der alter heim*, is, as Tato Laviera claimed, whatever one makes of today's United States. Animosity and resentment are put on hold, the semiburied past is left behind while the present is seized. Our generation is triumphantly ready to reflect on its immediate and far-reaching assimilation process, and this inevitably leads to a path of divided loyalty. Indeed, divided we stand, without a sense of guilt. Gringolandia, after all, is our ambivalent, schizo-

phrenic *hogar*. We are reconsidering the journey, looking back while wondering: Who are we? Where did we come from? What have we achieved? Overall, the resulting hybrid, a mix of English and Spanish, of the land of leisure and futuristic technology and the Third World, has ceased to be an elusive utopia. Latin America has invaded the United States and reversed the process of colonization highlighted by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the Spanish-American War. Suddenly, and without much fanfare, the First World has become a conglomeration of tourists, refugees, and émigrés from what Waldo Frank once called *la América hispana*, a *sopa de razas e identidades*, where those who are fully adapted and happily functional are looked down on.

This metamorphosis includes many losses, of course, for all of us, from alien citizens to full-status citizens: the loss of language; the loss of identity; the loss of self-esteem; and, more important, the loss of tradition. Some are left behind en route, whereas others forget the flavor of home. But less is more, and confusion is being turned into enlightenment. In this nation of imagination and plenty, where newcomers are welcome to reinvent their past, loss quickly becomes an asset. The vanishing of a collective identity—Hispanics as eternally oppressed—necessarily implies the creation of a refreshingly different self. Confusion, once recycled, becomes effusion and revision. Among many, Guillermo Gómez-Peña has verbalized this type of cultural hodgepodge, this convoluted sum of parts making up today's Hispanic condition. "I am a child of crisis and cultural syncretism," he argued, "half hippie and half punk."

My generation grew up watching movies about cowboys and science fiction, listening to *cumbias* and tunes from the Moody Blues, constructing altars and filming in Super-8, reading the *Corno Emplumado* and *Artforum*, traveling to Tepoztlán and San Francisco, creating and de-creating myths. We went to Cuba in search of political illumination, to Spain to visit the crazy grandmother and to the U.S. in search of the instantaneous musical-sexual Paradise. We found nothing. Our dreams wound up getting caught in the webs of the border.

Our generation belongs to the world's biggest floating population: the weary travelers, the dislocated, those of us who left because we didn't fit anymore, those of us who still haven't arrived because we don't know where to arrive at, or because we can't go back anymore.

Our deepest generational emotion is that of loss, which comes from our having left. Our loss is total and occurs at multiple levels.

Loss of land and self. By accommodating ourselves to the American Dream, by forcing the United States to acknowledge us as part of its uterus, we are transforming ourselves inside El Dorado and, simultaneously, reevaluating the culture and environment we left behind. Not since the abolition of slavery and the waves of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe has a group been so capable of turning everybody upside down. If, as W. E. B. Du Bois once claimed, the problem of the twentieth century was meant to be the problem of the color line, the next hundred years will have acculturation and miscegenation as their leitmotif and strife. Multiculturalism will sooner or later fade away and will take with it the need for Latinos to inhabit the hyphen and exist in constant contradiction as eternal *axólotls*. By then the United States will be a radically different country. Meanwhile, we are experiencing a rebirth and are having a festive time deciding to be undecided.

How can one understand the hyphen, the encounter between Anglos and Hispanics, the mix between George Washington and Simón Bolívar? Has the cultural impact of south-of-the-border immigrants in a country that prides itself on its Eurocentric lineage and constantly tries to minimize, even hide, its Spanish and Portuguese backgrounds, been properly analyzed? Where can one begin exploring the Latino hybrid and its multiple links to Hispanic America? To what extent is the battle inside Latinos between two conflicting worldviews, one obsessed with immediate satisfaction and success, the other traumatized by a painful, unresolved past, evident in our art and letters? Should the opposition to the English Only movement, Chicano activism, Cuban exile politics, and the Nuyorican existential dilemma be approached as manifestations of a collective, more-or-less homogeneous psyche? Are Brazilians, Jamaicans, and Haitians—all non-Spanish speakers—our siblings? Is Oscar Hijuelos possible without José Lezama Lima and Guillermo Cabrera Infante? Or is he only a child of Donald Barthelme and Susan Sontag? What does he as a Cuban-American share with Chicana Sandra Cisneros and Dominican-American novelist Julia Alvarez, author of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, other than an amorphous and evasive ethnic background? Are César Chávez and twentieth-century Mexican anarchist Ricardo Flores Magón ideological cousins? Is Edward Rivera, author of the memoir *Family Installments* and an English writer and professor at City College of New York, in any way related to Eugenio María de Hostos, René Marqués, and José Luis González, Puerto Rico's literary cornerstones in the twentieth century? Is the Mexican-American writer Rodolfo A. Anaya, responsible for *Bless Me, Ultima*, a successor of Juan Rulfo and William Faulkner? Ought Richard Rodríguez be

seen as a result of a mixed marriage between Alfonso Reyes and John Stuart Mill? Is Arthur Alfonso Schomburg—the so-called Sherlock Holmes of Negro History, whose collection of books on African-American heritage forms the core of the New York Public Library's present-day Schomburg Center for Research on Black Culture—our ancestor, in spite of his disenchantment with his Puerto Ricanness? How do Latinos perceive the odd link between the clock and the crucifix? Is there such a thing as Latin time? Is there a branch of Salvadoran literature in English? What makes gay Latinos unique? What is the role played by Spanish-language television and printed media in the shaping of a new Latino identity?

These are urgent questions in need of comprehensive answers and deserving many independent volumes. My objective in the following pages is to set what I judge to be an appropriate intellectual framework to begin discussing them. I shall therefore address the tensions within the minority group, our differences and our similarities, as well as the role played by popular and high-brow culture in and beyond the community. My approach, I should warn, isn't chronological. This, after all, is not a history of Hispanics in the United States but a set of reflections on our plural culture. (A chronology at the end of the volume offers a sequence of historical and cultural highlights.) Juxtaposing, when pertinent, some biographical information to enlighten the unaware, I shall comment on politics, race, sex, and the spiritual realm; discuss stereotypes; and consider the effects of a handful of writers, pictorial artists, folk musicians, and media luminaries on culture in the United States. I titled the book *The Hispanic Condition* because I am eager to show the multiple links between Latinos and their siblings south of the Rio Grande, a journey from Spanish into English, the northward odyssey of the omnipresent bracero worker, jíbaro immigrant, and Cuban refugee. In the fashion of the lifelong attempts by Zora Neale Hurston, Arthur Alfonso Schomburg, and the black artists and scholars during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1930s, who fought to disprove once and for all the common misconception that "Negros have no history," my overall hope is to demonstrate that we Latinos have an abundance of histories, linked to a common root but with decisively different traditions. At each and every moment, these ancestral histories determine who we are and what we think. As I am sure it can already be perceived, my personal interest is not in the purely political, demographic, and sociological dimensions, but, rather, in the Hispanic American and Latino intellectual and artistic legacies. What attracts me more than actual events are works of fiction and visual art, historiography as a cradle where cultural artifacts are

nurtured. Idiosyncratic differences puzzle me: What distinguishes us from Anglo-Saxons and other European immigrants as well as from other minorities (such as blacks and Asians) in the United States? Is there such a thing as a Latino identity? Ought José Martí and Eugenio María de Hostos be considered the forefathers of Latino politics and culture? Need one return to the Alamo to come to terms with the clash between two essentially different psyches, Anglo-Saxon Protestant and Hispanic Catholic? The voyage to what William H. Gass called "the heart of the heart of the country" needs to begin by addressing a crucial issue: the diversity factor. Latinos, no question, are a most difficult community to describe: Is the Cuban from Holguín similar in attitude and culture to someone from Managua, San Salvador, or Santo Domingo? Is the Spanish we all speak, our *lingua franca*, the only unifying factor? How do the various Hispanic subgroups understand the complexities of what it means to be part of the same minority group? Or do we perceive ourselves as a unified whole?

Culture and identity are a parade of anachronistic symbols, larger-than-life abstractions, less a shared set of beliefs and values than the collective strategies by which we organize and make sense of our experience, a complex yet tightly integrated construction in a state of perpetual flux. To begin, it is utterly impossible to examine Latinos without regard to the geography we come from. We are, we recognize ourselves to be, an extremity of Latin America, a diaspora alive and well north of the Rio Grande. For the Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem's Tevye the milkman, for instance, America was a synonym of redemption, the end of *pogroms*, the solution to earthly matters. Russia, Poland, and the rest of Eastern Europe were lands of suffering. Immigrating to America, where gold grew on trees and could easily be found on sidewalks, was synonymous with entering Paradise. To leave, never to look back and return, was an imperative. Many miles, almost impossible to breach again, divided the old land from the new. We, on the other hand, are just around the corner: Oaxaca, Mexico; Varadero, Cuba; and Sanuruce, Puerto Rico, are literally next door. We can spend every other month, even every other week, either north or south. Indeed, some among us swear to return home when military dictatorships are finally deposed and more benign regimes come to life, or simply when enough money is saved in a bank account. Meanwhile, we inhabit a home divided, multiplied, neither in the barrio or the besieged ghetto nor across the river or the Gulf of Mexico, a home either here or within hours' distance. José Antonio Villarreal's 1959 novel *Pocho*, for example, called by some critics "a foundational text" and

believed to be the first English-written novel by a Chicano, is precisely about the eternal need to return among Chicanos: a return to source, a return to the self. And Pablo Medina's meticulous Cuban-American autobiography *Exiled Memories*, along the same lines, is about the impossibility of returning to childhood, to the mother's soil, to happiness. But return is indeed possible in most cases. Cheap labor comes and goes back and forth to Puebla and San Juan.

One ought never to forget that Hispanics and their siblings north of the border have an intimate, long-standing, love-hate relationship. Latinos are a major source of income for the families they left behind. In Mexico, for instance, money wired by relatives working as pizza delivery boys, domestic servants, and construction workers amounts to a third of the nation's overall revenues. Is this nothing new, when one ponders previous waves of immigration? Perhaps. Others have dreamed of America as paradise on earth, but our arrival in the Promised Land with strings attached underscores troublesome patterns of assimilation. Whereas Germans, Irish, Chinese, and others may have evidenced a certain ambiguity and lack of commitment during their first stage of assimilation in the United States, the proximity of our original soil, both in the geographic and metaphorical sense, is tempting. This thought brings to mind a claim by the Iberian philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, author of *Rebellion of the Masses*, among many other titles, in a 1939 lecture delivered in Buenos Aires. Ortega y Gasset stated that Spaniards assumed the role of the New Man the moment they settled in the New World. Their attitude was the result not of a centuries-long process, but of an immediate and sudden transformation. To this idea the Colombian writer Antonio Sanín Cano once mistakenly added that Hispanics, *vis-à-vis* other settlers, have a brilliant capacity to assimilate; unlike the British, for instance, who can live for years in a foreign land and never become part of it, we do. What he forgot to add is that we achieve total adaptation at a huge cost to ourselves and others. We become the New Man and Woman carrying along our former environment. Add the fact that we are often approached as traitors in the place once called home: We left, we betrayed our patriotism, we rejected and were rejected by the milieu, we aborted ourselves and spat on the uterus. Cubans in exile are known as *gusanos*, worms in Havana's eyes. Mainland Puerto Ricans often complain of the lack of support from their original families in the Caribbean and find their cultural ties tenuous and thin. Mexicans have mixed feelings toward *Pachucos*, *Pochos*, and other types of Chicanos; when possible, Mexico ignores our politics and cultural manifestations, only taking

them into account when diplomatic relations with the White House are at stake.

Once in the United States, we are seen in unequal terms. Although England, France, and Spain were the chief nations to establish colonies this side of the Atlantic, the legacy of Iberian conquerors and explorers remains unattended, quasi-forgotten, almost deleted from the nation's memory. The first permanent European settlement in the New World was St. Augustine, Florida, founded by the Spanish in 1565, over forty years before the British established Jamestown in Virginia. Or simply consider things from an onomastic point of view: Los Angeles, Sausalito, San Luis Obispo, and San Diego are all Hispanic names. People know that during the U.S. Civil War, blacks, freed in 1863 from slavery as part of the Emancipation Proclamation (which covered only states in the Confederacy), fought on both sides; what is unknown or perhaps even silenced, what is left unrecognized, is that Hispanics were also active soldiers on the battlefield. When the war began in 1861, more than 10,000 Mexican-Americans served in both the Union and the Confederate armed forces. Indeed, when it comes to Latino history, the official chronology of the United States, from its birth until after World War II, is a sequence of omissions. Between 1910 and 1912, for instance, U.S. railroad companies recruited thousands of Hispanic workers, and nearly 2,000 braceros crossed the border every month to work for the railways. Also, Hispanic workers' unions are not a recent invention, and César Chávez was no sudden hero. Many Puerto Rican and Chicano rebellions occurred in the early stages of World War I, and organizers like Bernardo Vega and Jesús Colón were instrumental in shaping a new consciousness before the mythic La Causa movement took shape. For instance, after miners went on strike in Ludlow, Colorado, around the time that the Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir apparent to the Austro-Hungarian throne, was assassinated in Sarajevo, more than fifty people, many who were Mexican-Americans, were killed by the National Guard. Puerto Rican and Chicano soldiers fought in World War II, and many more participated in the Korean War. Furthermore, Martí, Dr. Ramón Emeterio Betances, Hostos, and other revolutionaries were active in New York and elsewhere in the United States in the late nineteenth century, especially in the wake of the Spanish-American War. But very few are acquainted with these facts.

Flowing some 1,880 miles from southwestern Colorado to the Gulf of Mexico, the Río Grande, the Río Turbio, is the dividing line, the end and the beginning, of the United States and Latin America. The river not only sepa-

rates the twin cities of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez and of Brownsville and Matamores, but also, and more essentially, is an abyss, a wound, a borderline, a symbolic-dividing-line-between-what-Alan-Riding-once-forcibly-described-as "distant neighbors." The flow of water has had different names during several periods and along several different reaches of its course. An incomplete list, offered by Paul Horgan in his monumental Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Great River: The Rio Grande in North American History*, follows: Gran River, P'osoge, Río Bravo, Río Bravo del Norte, Río Caudaloso, Río de la Concepción, Río de las Palmas, Río de Nuestra Señora, Río de Buenaventura del Norte, Río del Norte, Río del Norte y de Nuevo México, Río Grande, Río Grande del Norte, Río Guadalquivir, River of May, Tiguex River, and (by extension) the Torilla Curtain. What's in a name? South facing north thinks of it as a stream carrying poisonous water; north facing south prefers to see it as an obstacle to illegal *espaldas mojadas*, a service door to one's backyard. The name game pertains to our deceitful, equivocal, and evasive collective appellation: What are we: Hispanics, *hispanos*, Latinos (and Latinas), Latins, *iberoamericanos*, Spanish, Spanish-speaking people, Hispanic Americans (*vis-à-vis* the Latin Americans from across the Rio Grande), *mestizos* (and *mestizas*); or simply, Mexican-Americans, Cuban-Americans, Dominican-Americans, Puerto Ricans on the Mainland, and so forth? And should I add *Spiks* to the list? (Pedro Juan Soto, who taught at the Universidad de Puerto Rico, once tried to trace the word's origins and mutant spelling to *Spigs*, used until 1915 to describe Italians, lovers of *spiggoty*, not *spaghatti*, and from *I no spik inglis*; the term then evolved to *Spics*, *Spicks*, and currently *Spiks*). Encyclopedias, at least until recently, described us as *Hispanic Americans vis-à-vis* the *Latin Americans* from south of the border. The confusion evidently recalls the fashion in which Black, Nigger, Negro, Afro-American, and African-American have been used from before Abraham Lincoln's abolition of slavery to the present. Nowadays the general feeling is that one unifying term addressing everybody is better and less confusing; but would anybody refer to Italian, German, French, and Spanish writers as a single category of European writers? The United States, a mosaic of races and cultures, always needs to speak of its social quilt in generally stereotypical ways. Aren't Asians, blacks, and Jews also seen as homogeneous groups, regardless of the origin of their various members? Nevertheless, in the printed media, on television, out in the streets, and in the privacy of their homes, people hesitate between a couple of favorites: *Hispanic* and *Latino*.

Although these terms may seem interchangeable, an attentive ear senses a

difference. Preferred by conservatives, the former is used when the talk is demographics, education, urban development, drugs, and health; the latter, on the other hand, is the choice of liberals and is frequently used to refer to artists, musicians, and movie stars. Ana Castillo is Latina and José Feliciano is Latino, as is Andres Serrano, the controversial photographer, author of *Piss Christ*, who, alongside Robert Mapplethorpe, prompted conservative Senator Jesse Helms and others, in the late 1980s, to consolidate the so-called culture war against obscenity in modern art. Former New York City Schools Chancellor Joseph Fernandez is Hispanic, as are Congressman José Serrano and Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer. A sharper difference: Hispanic is used by the federal government to describe the heterogeneous ethnic minority with ancestors across the Rio Grande and in the Caribbean archipelago, but since these citizens are *latinoamericanos*, Latino is acknowledged by liberals in the community as correct. The issue, less transitory than it seems, invites us to travel far and away to wonder what's behind the name Latin America, where the misunderstanding apparently began. During the 1940s and even earlier, *Spanish* was a favorite term used by English speakers to name those from the Iberian peninsula and across the border: Ricardo Montalban was Spanish, as were Pedro Flores, Pedro Carrasquillo, and Poncho Sanchez, although one was Mexican and the others were Cuban and Puerto Rican. In Anglo-Saxon eyes, all were Latin lovers, mambo kings, and spiffires homogenized by a mother tongue. It goes without saying that from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century, the part of the New World (a term coined by Peter Martyr, an early biographer of Columbus)\* known today as Latin America was called Spanish America (and, to some, Iberian America); linguistically, the geography excluded Brazil and the three Guyanas. The term *Hispanic American* (*Hispanic* meaning "citizen of Hispania," the way Romans addressed Spaniards) captured the spotlight in the 1960s, when waves of legal and undocumented immigrants began pouring in from Mexico, Central America, Puerto Rico, and other Third World countries. (The term *Third World* is the abominable creation of Franz Fanon and was largely promoted by Luis Echeverría Alvarez, a simpleminded Mexican president. Carlos Fuentes, in his volume on Spain and the Americas, *The Buried Mirror*, prefers the term *developing* rather than *Third World* or *underdeveloped*.) When nationalism emerged as a cohesive force in Latin America, *Spanish-*

\* See my book *Imagining Columbus: The Literary Voyage* (New York: Twayne-Macmillan, 1993), where I discuss the birth of the Americas in Europe's collective imagination.

American lost its value because of its reference to Spain, now considered a foreign, imperialist invader. The Spanish conquistadors were loudly denounced as criminals, a trend inaugurated by Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas centuries before, but until then not legitimized by the powers that be.

As Spanish speakers became a political and economic force, the term Hispanic was appropriated by the government and the media. It describes people on the basis of their cultural and verbal heritage. Placed alongside categories like Caucasian, Asian, and black, it proves inaccurate simply because a person (me, for instance) is Hispanic *and* Caucasian, Hispanic *and* black; it ignores a reference to race. After years in circulation, it has already become a weapon, a stereotyping machine. Its synonyms are drug addict, criminal, prison inmate, and out-of-wedlock family. Latino has then become the option, a sign of rebellion, the choice of intellectuals and artists, because it emerges from within this ethnic group and because its etymology simultaneously denounces Anglo and Iberian oppression. But what is truly Latin (Roman, Hellenistic) in it? Nothing, or very little. Columbus and his crew called Cuba, Juana and Puerto Rico, Hispaniola (the latter's capital was San Juan Bautista de Puerto Rico). One of the first West Indies islands they encountered, now divided into the Dominican Republic and Haiti, was known as Española (later, Saint Domingue and Hispaniola). During colonial times, the region was called Spanish America because of its linguistic preponderance, and then, by the mid-nineteenth century—with Paris the world's cultural center and romanticism at its height—a group of educated Chileans suggested the name *l'Amérique latine*, which, sadly to say, was favored over Spanish America. The sense of homogeneity that came from a global embrace of Roman constitutional law and the identity shared through the Romance languages (mainly Spanish, but also Portuguese and French) were crucial to the decision. Simón Bolívar, the region's ultimate hero, who was born in Venezuela and fought an ambitious revolution for independence from Iberian dominion in Boyacá in 1819, saw the term as contributing to the unification of the entire southern hemisphere. Much later, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy also embraced and promoted it. Yet historians and esthetes like Pedro Henríquez Ureña and Luis Alberto Sánchez railed against the designation: perhaps Hispanic America *and* Portuguese America, but please, never Latin America. Much like the name America is a historical misconception that is used to describe the entire continent—one that originated from the explorer Amerigo Vespucci (after all, Erik the Red, a Viking voyager who set foot on this side of the

Atlantic around the year 1000, and even poor, disoriented Cristóbal Colón, arrived first)—Latino makes little sense even if Romance languages in Latin America are true equalizers that resulted from the so-called 1492 discovery.

This idea brings to mind a statement made by Aaron Copland after a 1941 tour of nine South American countries. "Latin America as a whole does not exist," he said. "It is a collection of separate countries, each with different traditions. Only as I traveled from country to country did I realize that you must be willing to split the continent up in your mind."

In mammoth urban centers (Los Angeles, Miami, New York), the Spanish-language media—newspapers and television stations—address their constituency as *los hispanos*, but hardly ever as *los latinos*. The deformed adjective *hispano* is used instead of *hispánico*, which is the correct Spanish word; the reason: *hispánico* is too pedantic, too academic, too Iberian. When salsa, meringue, and other rhythms are referred to, *latino* is used. Again, the distinction, artificial and difficult to sustain, is unclear; the Manhattan daily *El Diario*, for example, calls itself the champion of Hispanics, whereas *Impacto*, a national publication that is proud of its sensationalism, has as its subtitle "The Latin News" (notice: *Latin*, not *Latino*). Inevitably, the whole discussion reminds me of the Gerstwin song performed on roller skates by Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in *Shall We Dance*: I say to-may-to and you say to-mah-to.

From Labrador to the Pampas, from Cape Horn to the Iberian peninsula, from Garcilaso de la Vega and Count Lucanor to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Andrés Bello, the scope of Hispanic civilization—which began in the caves of Altamira, Buxo, and Tito Bustillo some 25,000 or 30,000 years ago ("the ribs of Spain," as Miguel de Unamuno would call them)—is indeed outstanding. Although I honestly prefer Hispanic as a composite term and would rather not use Latino, is there value in opposing a consensus? Or, as Franz Kafka would ask, Is there any hope in a kingdom where cats chase after a mouse? I herewith suggest using *Latinos* to refer to those citizens from the Spanish-speaking world living in the United States and Hispanics to refer to those living elsewhere. Which means that, by any account, a Latino is also an Hispanic, but not necessarily vice versa.

As for the pertinent art of Martín Ramirez, the mute Chicano artist whose drawings were shown at the Corcoran Gallery in the late 1980s, an Oliver Sacks-like "disoriented mariner" in an ever-changing galaxy, his quiet vicissitude in Gringolandia's labyrinthine mirrors will become my leitmotif. I am attracted to the striking coherence and color of his 300-

some paintings. Although produced by a schizophrenic, these images manage to construct a well-rounded, fantastic universe, with figures like trains, beasts, automobiles, women, leopards, deer, *banidos*, and the Virgen de Guadalupe; they are characterized by heroism and a mystical approach to life. He is a true original, a visionary we cannot afford to ignore. Indeed, in terms of authenticity, Ramírez, it seems to me, reverses the syndrome of so-called unreal realism, of which the best, most enlightening examples are Chester Seltzer, who took the Hispanic name Amado Muro and pretended to write realist accounts of growing up Latino, and the now infamous Danny Santiago.

When Santiago's admirable first novel, *Famous All Over Town* (prophetically called, while in manuscript form and until its uncorrected galley-proof stage, *My Name Will Follow You Home*) appeared in 1983, reviews praised it as wonderful and hilarious. Chato Medina, its courageous hero, was a denizen of an unlivable barrio in East Los Angeles, the product of a disintegrating family who had a bunch of disoriented friends. The novel received the Richard and Hilda Rosenthal Award of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and was described as a stunning debut about adolescent initiation among Latinos. The author's biography on the back cover, which appeared without a photograph, stated that he had been raised in California and that many of his stories had appeared in national magazines. The arrival of a talented writer was universally acclaimed. Nevertheless, success soon turned sour. A journalist and ex-friend of Santiago, motivated by personal revenge, announced Santiago's true identity in a piece published in August 1984 in the *New York Review of Books*.

It turned out that Daniel Lewis James, the author's real name, was not a young Chicano, but a septuagenarian Anglo, who was born in 1911 into a well-to-do family in Kansas City, Missouri. A friend of John Steinbeck, James was educated at Andover and graduated from Yale in 1933. He moved to Hollywood and joined the Communist party, together with his wife Lilit, a ballerina. He worked with Charlie Chaplin, collaborating on *The Great Dictator*, and wrote, together with Sid Herzig and Fred Sardi, a Broadway musical, *Bloomer Girl*, which opened in 1944. During the 1950s, he devoted himself to writing horror movies. He was blacklisted during the McCarthy era, when the House Committee on Un-American Activities was investigating left-wing infiltration of the movie industry. The Lewises began a solid friendship with the East Los Angeles Chicano community, attending fiestas and inviting scores of Chicanos to their Carmel Highlands cliffside mansion. As a

result of that relationship, James began to feel close to the Latino psyche, digesting its linguistic and idiosyncratic ways.

Subsequently, Father Alberto Huerta, a scholar who teaches at the University of San Francisco and has devoted a large part of his intellectual endeavors to analyzing the life and times of the outlaw Joaquín Murieta, defended the beleaguered writer in the journal *The Californians*, accusing trendy Latino writers and New York intellectuals of "brown-listing" a genius. Father Huerta had kept a four-year-long correspondence with Santiago. It originated after the future author of *Famous All Over Town* reacted to one of Huerta's essays on Murieta. They met at Santiago's Carmel Highlands home in 1984, and became friends. Father Huerta remains Santiago's most ardent defender. He is adamant about the unfair treatment the writer has been subjected to, and when I wrote critically of the controversial novel in 1993, he sent me a cordial but strong letter inviting me to change my opinions.

After the scandal erupted, an open symposium, sponsored by the Berkeley-based Before Columbus Foundation, entitled "Danny Santiago: Art or Fraud," took place in Modern Times Bookstore in San Francisco. The participants were Gary Soto, Rudolfo A. Anaya, and Ishmael Reed. James, of course, is a paradigm. Like the scandalous identity of Forest Carter, the white supremacist responsible for the best-seller *The Education of Little Tree*, and like other authors of bunted background, it was an interesting career move to go from being a writer of low-budget movies to the darling of Latino letters. In spite of the aesthetic power of *Famous All Over Town*, Lewis personifies the feverish need in a nation consumed by the wars for identities to transgress. Authenticity and histrionics: in essence, Ramírez's silence and Danny Santiago's theatrical voice are opposites. They are the bookends of Latino culture.

Which brings me back to the culture itself. In a symbolic poem by Judith Ortiz Cofer titled "The Latin Deli" and published in book form in 1993, Hispanics north of the border are seen as an amorphous hybrid. Sharing heterogeneous backgrounds, they are summed up by an archetypal mature lady. The poet reduces the universe to a kind of curative store, a *bodega* in which customers look for a medicine to their disheartened spirit. This Patroness of Exiles, "a woman of no-age who was never pretty, who spends her days selling canned memories," listens to Puerto Ricans complain about airfares to San Juan, to Cubans "perfecting their speech of a 'glorious return' to Havana—where no one has been allowed to die and nothing to change until then," and to Mexicans "who pass through, talking lyrically of *dólares* to be made in El Norte—all waiting the comfort of spoken Spanish." Ortiz Cofer's image,

incredibly inviting, is perfect to conclude this chapter. Latinos, while racially diverse and historically heterogeneous, an *ajijaco* (Cuban stew) made of diverse ingredients, by chance or destiny have all been summed up in the same grocery store called America. America, where exile becomes home, where memory is reshaped, reinvented. In the eyes of strangers, our hopes and nightmares, our energy and desperation, our libido, add up to a magnified whole. But who are we really? What do we want? Why are we here? And for how long will the *bodega* be owned by somebody else?



## Blood and Exile

In *The Repeating Island*, Antonio Benítez-Rojo, the exiled Cuban-American novelist and critic, claimed that the Caribbean, a basin pretty much unified by sugar and cacao plantations, is an archipelago made up of one single archetypal island, an island-of-islands, whose virtue is not lessened by its heterogeneity, a reality incorporating everyone in the region while allowing for individualities to persist. Something along the same lines ought to be said about Hispanic America: Syncretistic, essentially Indian, African, and European, and with *el sabor mestizo y mulato*, it is a result of the original miscegenation, the slave trade—what is known as the plantation economy in the Caribbean and *cacique* feudal systems elsewhere—as Simón Bolívar dreamed it, a nation of nations.

A handful of scholars and aficionados, the majority of them non-Hispanic, have tried with various degrees of success to tackle the collective Latino historical, political, and social minutiae. Most authors compare us to previous minorities to estimate our degree of adaptability and assimilation to the mainstream, from Joan W. Moore and Harry Pachon's 1985 sociological volume, *Hispanics in the United States*, as well as L. H. Gann and Peter J. Duigan's history of Hispanics north of the border, which appeared a year after, to Thomas Weyr's sociological study on breaking the melting pot, Linda Chavez's conservative treatise *Out of the Barrio: The Politics of Hispanic Assimilation*, and Earl Shorris's excessive, grandiloquent, overwritten, and unfriendly collective biography *Latinos*. What these authors frequently lack, first and foremost, is an insightful view of our cultural manifestations, so they at times confuse anthropology and folklore with art; second, they lack a